Communication Skills in Composition

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With the growth of peer tutoring as a means of meeting the needs of composition students, instructors can begin to learn more about what fosters a successful learning experience. The kind of learning that takes place in a one-to-one tutoring setting has some very unique characteristics, such as warmth, open communication and informality (Beck, Hawkins and Silver 1978). The development and implementation of communication skills underscores the success of the peer tutoring relationship. By examining the tutoring relationship, composition instructors can perhaps learn about the inherent communication that is occurring in English classes. It is also expected that the ability to harness and utilize these skills will increase the prospects of producing competent writers and effective communicators.

As a trained counselor working in the Writing Skills Workshop at Queens College (of the City University of New York), I learned a great deal about the links between communication and writing. Tutoring offers students a less threatening environment in which to express themselves verbally and in writing. This is in contrast with the typical university course, where students usually maintain a passive role in the learning task (Rogers 1961). Curran (1972) has explored the similarities between a counseling session and a learning experience. One of the underlying themes of his book, Counseling-Learning: A Whole-Person Model, was the students and teachers need to communicate thoroughly in order to achieve growth on both cognitive and emotional levels.

Composition instructors can gain increased effectiveness by applying some of the characteristics of tutoring to their classes. Bruffee (1972) has pointed out that the tutoring relationship offers an alternative to the relative dependence of the traditional English class. In a peer tutoring session, the student collaborates in the learning process, and can take responsibility for achieving a specific academic skill. The communication that occurs between a student and a tutor is based primarily on the peer relationship. When a student presents a problem, whether it is a written piece or a verbal question,

there can be a feeling of insecurity along with a sense of in-competence. The tutor's initial response will usually be empathetic; that is, it will be fairly easy for the tutor to understand both the problem and how it is influencing the student. If the student feels that there is understanding of the intellectual and affective aspects of the task, then the student can receive feedback and criticism with a minimum of anxiety.

The training of tutors in communication skills incorporates many of the potential attributes of good teaching. The goal of this train-ing model is to build effective communication skills and to develop the tutors' self-confidence. It is made clear to the tutors that they are not being trained to be amateur counselors or therapists. In fact, the objective of this approach in both tutoring and teaching is increased rigor in writing. The three step method of building com-munication skills for tutors that follows offers examples of learning with theoretical and experiential applications:

1-Listening
      Student: "I wrote this paper for my teacher, but she says that
   I didn't follow the outline. I guess I have to do it over."
      Tutor: "Were there any grammatical errors in it?"

In this brief sample of a tutoring interchange, the student discusse the problem, but the tutor does not give any evidence that shows that he has listened. The process of listening involves more than just keeping your ear tuned to the student. Listening in the learning environment is an active process; the tutor or teacher should attempt to give student a feeling that their work is worthwhile (Rogers 1970). A creative lis-tener is able to paraphrase the student, thereby giving the student a sense that there is an understanding of the problem.

An alternative response to the same student might be:
Tutor: "You did your work, but it wasn't what the assignment called for, right?"

Here the tutor gives the student a response that reinforces the fact that he has been heard. It can very often help to go over what has been said before tackling the present   problem.

2-Understanding
      Student: "I don't like my English teacher. I sure that she dis-likes me and thinks that I'm dumb. So why should I bring my papers to you?"
      Tutor: "Since you didn't bring any written work, we can go over paragraphs today."
      In this dialogue, the tutor does not hear the anger or frustration that may exist in the student's relationship with the instructor. This could further cloud the learning process. The tutor should try to understand both what is being said, and how it is being expressed. This can be achieved by using the inherent empathy of the peer relationship to establish a more complete understanding of the student's difficulties (Rogers 1951). Striving to adopt the frame of reference of the student can greatly decrease resistance in the acceptance of new ideas.

An alternative response:

Tutor: "Maybe you are angry at your teacher for referring you here. Perhaps we can talk about what tutoring is for a while."

This tutor gives the student a valuable chance to discuss his experience in class and in the tutoring center. It is this type of response that allow students to discuss their feelings about being advised to see a tutor. It is important to realize how preconceived notions about tutoring and learning English can influence the study of writing.

3-Feedback

Student: "Well, what do you think of my essay?"

Tutor: "I don't understand it at all. You made countless errors in sentence structure, punctuation and verb endings."

The process of feedback is the essence of teaching and tutoring writing. Here the tutor gives his immediate response, but it could be devastating to a student. Feeding information back into a learning situation can be the key that unlocks the door to a good, creative educational experience. The tutoring session depends upon the utilization of feedback on both cognitive and interpersonal levels. When a student is told that he has incorrect punctuation, or that his ideas lack organization, a feeling of frustration can develop.

An alternative response:

Tutor: "I like the style and story, however, there are some confusing elements that detract from your work; I'm sure that we can work them out together."

The tutor who is aware of the difficulties that many students perceive in writing does not necessarily sacrifice honesty about a piece. Rather, an attempt is made to look beyond the tutor's own frame of reference so that the reaction will include both empathy and candor. It may be that the tutor, who didn't understand the paper because of the grammatical errors, did like the story or the content, but wasn't responding to that feeling.

At this point, you are probably thinking that this sounds good on paper, but how can it be applied in the classroom. Since writing is a form of communication, these skills are not the sole property of the tutor; instructors should be aware of them if they want to receive writing that communicates correctly and effectively. The Rogerian approach has a recent, yet encouraging, background in composition and rhetoric (Hairston 1976); however, composition instructors have not finished bridging the gap between good writing and the use of communication skills. The first step in the process of reaching students is to actively listen to them. The idea that a good deal of learning to write requires becoming aware of what we already know is only pragmatic if the instructor listens to his class (Bruffee 1973).

An interesting example involving listening skills occurred in the Writing Workshop during a group lesson on subordination. When I heard a student make a comment that was, in actuality, a subordinated sentence, I immediately wrote it on the blackboard for the students to see. This method gives the class a sense of collaboration, and

at the same time, makes a difficult lesson seem easier. When the "answer" is found within a student's speaking or writing, then internalizing seemingly complex concepts becomes less problematic.

Applying understanding skills in a classroom is a bit more complicated, because the setting of a classroom in a college makes it hard for students to express honest feelings. If an instructor could give the class the final ten minutes for questions and comments, the students may feel more comfortable about speaking up. In addition, a composition teacher can set a precedent for greater depth in writing by using understanding skills in class. By looking at both what is being written and how it is prepared, an instructor establishes a viable model on how to prepare and present material. For example, if students are constantly handing in their assignments late or in a sloppy manner, an instructor can question the students about the amount of investment that they are making. In this case, students can learn by experience that it is not only what is said that is important, but how it is perceived by others. Also, the application of understanding skills to compositions and essays is often overlooked. It can be useful to have students look at understanding from a theoretical viewpoint as they begin to write papers on literature and poetry.

Feedback for the composition teacher provides the essence of the learning process. If an instructor is able to use a Rogerian approach in commenting on papers and to classroom questions, then it is likely that there will be greater acceptance on the part of the student. The instructor must ask himself how it would feel to receive a paper that is full of red marks and highly critical comments. I have found that if I imagine myself in the student's place when I am working with him, I naturally become more sensitive. I remain just as honest, but I am able to interject in a humane fashion. The fact that the feedback in a tutoring session is based on a one-to-one relationship provides a clue to the instructor. If he can envision himself speaking directly to a student when he reviews a paper or answers a question, his response will reflect both empathy and honesty.

Using empathy in response to writing can lead to a greater degree of academic rigor and competence. There appears to be a tendency in many writing labs and composition classes to not be overly critical of students' writing so as not to hinder their receptiveness to instructors suggestions. In a counseling or tutoring relationship, trust is first established before any effective feedback can be given. Once trust and sincerity exist, it is easier for a student to accept the type of critic that is necessary to improve writing skills. When an instructor has bee able to listen and understand students both verbally and in writing, confronting such issues as basic grammar and incorrect syntax will not be perceived as trivialities; in fact, students may welcome this feedbac coming from a context of open communication.

The composition teacher can utilize some of the attributes of the tutoring relationship when it isn't available. If he finds that there are certain students who are good writers and communicate well verbally, they can be used as peer tutors in the classroom. When a lesson is complex, the class can break up into small groups for practice and elaboration. This may give some students a chance to ask questions in a less threatening environment. The opportunity to work with a peer on writing problems does offer students a supplementary, yet vital,

learning experience. The type of communication that goes on between peers in a tutoring setting has some positive effects on students' work (Beck, Hawkins and Silver 1978).

The communication skills that I have observed in my own work and in my colleagues in tutoring and counseling are, in essence, very simple. What we try to do is listen, understand and feed information back into the learning situation in a caring and frank manner. For the composition teacher, the task is a bit more complicated, but the resources are available (and probably abundant). Since the composition instructor specializes in written communication, then all that is needed is the application of this awareness to verbal and written interactions. If he is able to do this, then the students will understand his knowledge about writing better, and the communication and compositions of the class will increase in quality. Providing that our stated goal in composition is to help our students grow as writers and communicators, then we, as educators, must be willing to grow with them.

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